

Mirror of Modernity

Invented Traditions of Modern Japan

Stephen Vlastos, Editor

Twentieth Century Japan:
The Emergence of a World Power, 9

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The idea that nations invent themselves is not a new concept. However, for some reason, possibly political, this rarely has been applied to modern Japan. That omission has been corrected by the compendium of authors who have contributed their works to this volume. Skillfully edited by Steven Vlastos, *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* is the result of a series of international conferences, the first of which was held in 1990.

Mirror begins with Vlastos's "Tradition: Past/Present Culture and Modern Japanese History." He first provides an overview of the project's stimulus, the ground-breaking work of Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). He then introduces his colleagues' essays, all of which amply demonstrate the artifice of modern Japan's "traditional" aspects. Besides outlining *Mirror's* primary argument, this chapter is a foray into discourse(s) and definitions, one which serves as a splendid introduction to the labyrinth of jargon through which the reader must maneuver in some of the articles.

"Part One: Harmony" consists of three essays which highlight the artificiality of Japan's celebrated social *wa* (harmony). In "The Invention of Japanese-style Labor Management," Andrew Gordon equates Japan's modernization with industrialization, which in turn signifies the "harmonization" of Japanese society, all of which is made possible by the State's co-option of the working population. Prewar ideologues portrayed Japan as one big (happy) family, with all the hierarchical relationships, cooperation and acquiescence to control inherent in that term. Postwar ideologues, on the other hand, have portrayed all members of Japanese society as equal partners in a joint venture, though of course some are more equal than others. Both constructs were/are being promulgated in the name of social harmony, the supposed touchstone of traditional Japanese society. Such ideals, of course, are double-edged swords, for obligations are created as part of the attempt to realize either; for example, the concept of *wa* can be used to legitimate worker demands in the face of corporate pressure.

Itō Kimio's "The Invention of Wa and the Transformation of the Image of Prince Shōtoku in Modern Japan," also argues that *wa* is but another government-engineered construct for co-opting the

citizenry. To buttress this assertion, he looks at governmental use of Prince Shōtoku (572–622) as a *wa*-inspiring image. The Meiji Government selected the prince for this role in part because of his supposed sponsorship of the "Seventeen Article Constitution," Article One of which stressed "Harmony (*wa*) is to be valued." Prior to World War II, Shōtoku served as an icon of morality for the nation; during the war, he and *wa* were used to unite the nation in support of the imperial cause. Following the war, Shōtoku would come to be portrayed as a pacifist, an ultimate harmonizer of societies.

Chapter three, Frank K. Upham's "Legal Consciousness as Invented Tradition," highlights one reason for government fascination with *wa*—the Japanese historically have been aggressively litigious. It was only in the Meiji era that the Japanese state found it useful to conjure up and then perpetuate the illusion that legal cases/lawsuits are alien to the "innate" Japanese psyche. Upham details this process, and the reasons behind it, most successfully.

The second section of *Mirror* focuses on competing concepts of "Village." Irwin Scheiner, in "The Japanese Village: Imagined, Real, Contested," proposes that whether it be expressed in reference to "the old home-town" (*furusato*) or "small-town life," nostalgia for idealized communities that never were, blinds or is used to blind the observer to the truly fragmented nature of such societies. Scheiner skillfully brings this out by examining the conflict between elites and non-elites in the premodern period and then juxtapositioning it against the rhetoric of contemporary Japan.

For his part, Vlastos argues against the assertion that "the rice-centered village" serves as the base of Japanese identity. In "Agrarianism without Tradition: The Radical Critique of Prewar Japanese Modernity," he notes that the view of agrarian communities as "a reservoir[s] of national culture" is a post-industrialized/post-modernization construct, one subject to debate. During the Meiji period, most intellectuals equated "the agrarian mentality" with conservatism, i.e., support for the State. Radical intellectuals held similar views, though with a twist. Believing that social harmony could only be found within rural society, villages were the ideal place in which to establish a utopian society based on totally new sociopolitical constructs. "Tradition" had limited, if any, place in the radicals' new world.

Louise Young's "Colonizing Manchuria: The Making of an Imperial Myth" deals with another form of "village," one which made "agrarian imperialism" possible. Agrarian imperialism, a hybridization of two disparate ideologies (agrarianism and the emigration movement), was used to both encourage and glorify Japan's expansion into Manchuria. The manufactured image of stalwart, united pioneers subduing hostile natives and civilizing the frontier was promulgated as legitimation for the state's expanding borders (a practice not unique to Japan).

Jennifer Robertson examines the contemporary ideal of "old [home] village"/*furusato* in "It Takes a Village: Internationalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan." She sees the current *furusato* fad as being but another construct of Otherness. There is increasing alienation of Tokyo, "the big city," from, and by, the rest of

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the country, not to mention the alienation of individuals from changing social constructs around them. This has resulted in urbanites heading out into the countryside looking for their Japanese “roots” or for a lost paradise (especially one in which women knew their place), albeit with a “theme park” mentality. By longing for the good old days that never were, and the status quo that went with them, such individuals prove that conservatism is not locale-specific.

This idea of nonurbanites as being “really Japanese” is taken up in the articles of “Part Three: Folk.” In “Chihō: Yanagita Kunio’s ‘Japan,’” Hashimoto Mitsuru reveals that Yanagita Kunio’s championing of Japanese folklore studies arose out of—whether intentional or not—his own emotional needs, as much as any intellectual interest. Alienated from the “modernization/Westernization” of society around him, Yanagita sought to provide a model for national identity based upon an innate, pure “Japanese character,” one which arose out of traditional rural community life. It was only the *jōmin*, “the abiding folk,” ostensibly on the periphery (*chihō*) of industrializing Japanese society, who through oral transmission of traditional values, etc., could reconstitute a true “Japaneseness” in the population at large. The artificiality of such “true Japaneseness” was ignored; rather, Yanagita advanced this ideal as the goal for which modern Japanese should be striving.

Yanagita’s later works, and the sociopolitical agenda behind them, are central also to H. D. Harootunian’s “Figuring the Folk: History, Politics, and Representation.” In this article, Harootunian chronicles the transformation of Yanagita’s original theories about “true Japaneseness” into concepts about the oneness of the “East Asian folk.” In their new configuration, these new theories—along

with those of others—provided support for Japan’s imperialist expansion into the rest of East Asia.

It must be said that “Part Four: Sports” provides a welcome break from the “dancing with discourse” of the previous section. Indeed, the articles by Inoue Shun and Lee Thompson clearly and succinctly detail the artificiality of two of contemporary Japan’s most cherished “traditions”: martial arts (*budō*) and *sumō*. In “The Invention of the Martial Arts: Kanō Jigorō and Kōdōkan Judō,” Inoue exposes the political agenda behind the post-1868 development of *budō* and its promotion as a manifestation of Japan’s national character.

This theme is continued in Thompson’s “The Invention of the Yokozuna and the Championship System, or, Futahaguro’s Revenge.” Although modern *sumō* (which like *judō* claims descent from ancient *Shintō* rituals) originated in the seventeenth century, most of its format was created in the early twentieth century. The tensions and contradictions inherent in *sumō* “traditions” are but reflections of those experienced by the society in which it operates.

Mirror’s fifth section, “Gender,” focuses on the creation of the “modern” Japanese woman. Jordan Sand’s “At Home and the Meiji Period: Inventing Japanese Domesticity” reveals the connection between environment and ideology. In order to domesticate the Japanese female, Meiji intellectuals deemed proper physical surroundings to be necessary. Thus it was that the traditional (based on lines of authority) spatial arrangement of the Japanese house was modified to one which emphasized “family-centered” space, the space in which the proper woman performed the “good wife-wise mother” role promoted by the State. This primarily was a middle-class ideal.

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Other women continued to work for a living. By the 1920s and 1930s, as Miriam Silverberg examines in “The Cafe Waitress Serving Modern Japan,” “rebellious” females—and/or those with few economic options—had entered the public sphere as eroticized members of the “service” sector. Neither geisha nor outright sex-worker, these women sought to create their own space in modern Japanese society, one which ran contrary to official state discourse.

“Part Six: History” takes a more macro-level approach to the “invention of tradition.” Kären Wigen’s “Constructing Shinano: Invention of a Neo-Traditional Region” examines the creation and use of regional identity as a tool for national solidification. The point is made that this creation occurred as part of both local and state agendas.

For his part, Andrew E. Barshay focuses on what might be termed “ideologic regionalism.” “‘Doubly Cruel’: Marxism and the Presence of the Past in Japanese Capitalism” looks at the problematic nature of “Japanese capitalism” through an examination of Kōza-ha Marxist Yamada Moritarō’s *Analysis of Japanese Capitalism* (1934). The construct of “Japanese capitalism,” albeit in conflicting forms, was/is one utilized by both the State and its opponents, each side imagining it so as to fit their own political agendas.

Carol Gluck’s “The Invention of Edo,” on the other hand, might be deemed “regional temporalism”; her refreshingly readable article details the role which “the past” plays in defining just what—and what not—a society/regime/individual is. In this case, the image of Edo (period) Japan, which has fluctuated ever since the establishment of the modern Meiji state, always has served as a reminder of national tradition(s), be they “real” or imagined.

Mirror of Modernity ends with “Afterward: Revisiting the Tradition/Modernity Binary,” written by a noted Indian historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty. Suffice it to say that it is a discursive critique of the preceding chapters.

Mirror of Modernity indeed does highlight a number of major advances made in the understanding of modern Japanese history and culture. Some chapters are clear, concise and informative, others are mind-numbing in their complexity. Taken in its entirety, this book would be a challenging (though necessary) read for the average M.A.-level student; individual chapters, on the other hand, would be useful for select undergraduates. Unfortunately, the informative nature of this work is obscured thanks to an excessive utilization of verbiage and/or “in-group” jargon by many of the contributors. It is this “privileging of theoretical discourse” which limits the use of *Mirror* as a textbook. ■

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